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THE DIRECTOR OF CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE

WASHINGTON, D. C. 20505

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23 MAY 1975

The President
The White House
Washington, D. C. 20500 ,

Dear Mr. President:

Your memo of 18 May concerning the rescue of the SS Mayaguez and its crew asked for any observations or suggestions which I believe might contribute to the improvement of the ability of the National Security Council machinery -- of which the intelligence community is a part -- to deal effectively with crisis situations. Attached to this letter is a paper which examines some of this machinery and suggests several ways to help clarify its procedures and correct its problems.

The Washington intelligence community consists of a number of inter-connected and interdependent organizations. During fast-breaking crises, the ability of all parts of this structure to function almost automatically is what is likely to determine the quality of support to you. To make sure that we can indeed function in this way, we seek constantly to improve both systems and procedures. There is always more to do, and the human aspects of the problem in particular need constant attention. But I believe the basic system is essentially sound, even though fine tuning and some repairs will always be required.

Specifically, concerning the Mayaguez incident, it is noteworthy that the equipment, the technical systems, and the procedures which link the various warning, communications, and command responsibilities

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WARNING NOTICE
SENSITIVE INTELLIGENCE SOURCES
AND METHODS

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apparently functioned quite well. The few "disconnects" in the overall system which we have identified seem to have been the consequence of human errors. Much the same can be said, I think, about problems encountered in past crises as well.

Not all the actions and decisions which occurred at the outset of the Mayaguez crisis in the various intelligence and operations centers conformed to established procedures. As a result, we are reemphasizing the need for adherence to existing procedures which seek to ensure effective intra- and interagency communications. We are also actively searching for ways to help to improve the Government's procedures for the initiation, coordination, and transmission of notices and special warnings to mariners -- procedures which were not at all clear during the Mayaguez incident.

We have, I think, the ability to cope with two crises in two geographically separated areas, e.g., the mid-March Vietnam/Cambodia and Arab/Israeli concerns. But the Mayaguez incident occurred in the immediate aftermath of the collapse of Vietnam and Cambodia and thus in effect tested our ability to contend with two major crises simultaneously in one compartment of our responsibilities (Southeast Asia). This tended to overload the human part of the system. This overload, in turn, posed problems for the intelligence community and other components of the Government as well.

On one subject of personal interest to you, Mr. President, I would like to undertake a special responsibility. I will henceforth confirm specifically that the White House Situation Room will inform you of a matter I think should be called immediately to your attention. I will ensure the same with respect to the other National Security Council members. This will undoubtedly be redundant in most cases, but I believe it a necessary step to ensure against future delay.

I welcome this opportunity to make these observations to you. I hope that our concentration on applying the lessons learned from the Mayaguez incident and other recent crises will enable us to perform the preventive maintenance needed to assure the highest standards of performance.

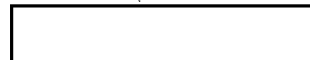
Respectfully,


W. E. Colby

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SUMMARY

1. The review of intelligence warning and alerting procedures and crisis management practices incident to the Mayaguez affair confirms that the basic and key ingredients of U. S. National Security Council machinery and intelligence community support functioned as they are supposed to. Events in the Gulf of Thailand in the period immediately preceding the seizure of the Mayaguez were noted by the intelligence community. However, these events did not seem at the time to be of sufficient intensity or of sufficiently clear significance to trigger the established alert and warning mechanisms. It is also true that the very early time of day the first reports of the attack on the Mayaguez were received, together with the fragmentary nature of the initial messages, contributed to a minor delay in the notification of principals. But this initial delay was quickly overcome, and the intelligence support machinery then moved into high gear and remained there throughout the crisis.

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